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## ***Irony and Dialectics: One-dimensional Man and 1968***

### ***Ironía y dialéctica: El hombre unidimensional y 1968***

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#### **ABSTRACT**

In this article, the author analyses the role of irony in one of the texts that had the most influence in the 1968 movements around the world: *The One-dimensional Man*, by Herbert Marcuse. Understanding irony as an evident sign of human two-dimensionality, and emphasizing its dialectical potential, the author questions the subversive viability and the specific characteristics of every type of irony. To conclude, he focuses in the operability of irony in Marcuse's work to encourage resilience and increase the possibility of inspiring political engagement through it.

**Keywords:** 1968 movements; Herbert Marcuse; *One-dimensional Man*; irony; political engagement.

#### **RESUMEN**

En el presente artículo, el autor analiza el papel que juega la ironía en uno de los textos que más influyeron en los movimientos de 1968 alrededor del mundo: *El hombre unidimensional*, de Herbert Marcuse. Entendiendo la ironía como una muestra evidente de la bidimensionalidad humana y haciendo énfasis en su potencial dialéctico, el autor se cuestiona sobre la viabilidad subversiva y las características particulares de cada tipo de ironía. Para concluir se centra en la operatividad que tiene la ironía en la obra de Marcuse para fomentar el desarrollo de resiliencia y aumentar la posibilidad de inspirar participación política a través de ella.

**Palabras clave:** movimientos de 1968; Herbert Marcuse; *El hombre unidimensional*; ironía; activismo político.

The joke played by history on Herbert Marcuse's *One-dimensional Man* was almost immediate. Written in the early 1960's, although arguably in preparation for the previous thirty years, the book expressed a profound pessimism about the chances for meaningful discontent in a culture that had lost its critical edge, a society that no longer had a revolutionary subject

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in the working class, and a politics that pretended to be democratic while tacitly continuing the totalitarianism it ostensibly opposed. Whatever promise there might be in the technological advances of modern industrial society to alleviate suffering and share abundance was thwarted, so Marcuse argued, by the fetish of a purely instrumentalized reason that masked the irrationality of the capitalist system as a whole. The passage from critical theory to liberating practice was blocked, and Marx's injunction in the eleventh *Thesis on Feuerbach* no longer to interpret, but instead to change society, could not be meaningfully honored. "The critical theory of society," Marcuse grimly concluded, "possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and future; holding no promise and showing no success, it remains negative" (Marcuse, 1991: 257). The only alternative he could envisage was a vague gesture of solidarity with those who remained marginalized by the system, the outcasts who quixotically devote their lives to what he called, somewhat melodramatically in capital letters, "the Great Refusal".

Although Marcuse had already introduced the distinction between one and two-dimensionality as early as the 1930's, the book also made available to an American audience for the first time many of the arguments of his erstwhile colleagues at the Institute of Social Research, in particular Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a work not yet translated, indeed no longer even in print in German, and thus virtually unknown in the English-speaking world.<sup>1</sup> It also tacitly drew on the contention of Friedrich Pollock that "state capitalism" –or what was sometimes called "organized capitalism"– had somehow contrived to suspend the contradictions that Marx had insisted would create a terminal crisis that would culminate, as Luxemburg famously put it, either in "socialism or barbarism".

But whereas the analyses of Horkheimer, Adorno and Pollock had been conceived in the desperate years of the Second World War, at what arguably was the nadir of modern Western civilization, *One-dimensional Man* appeared at a very different historical juncture, a time when desperation had given way to a certain complacency about the superiority of "the American way of life" to totalitarianisms of the right and left. A great deal of its power was derived from the relentless and unqualified way Marcuse debunked that assumption, daring to question the value of the welfare state, denouncing the "end of ideology" thesis as itself ideological, and linking trends in academic philosophy with those in society as a whole. If as Adorno famously said in *Minima Moralia*, "in psychoanalysis nothing is true except the exaggerations" (Adorno, 1978: 49), *One-dimensional Man* also seemed to get to truths that were hitherto occluded because its author was willing without apology to push his arguments to hyperbolic extremes. His was certainly not the vision of America that most of

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<sup>1</sup> The earlier discussions are noted in Shapiro (1970: 184). He challenges the idea that somehow "two-dimensionality" is normal and "one-dimensionality" an aberration caused by technological domination.

our citizens shared in 1964; indeed, the point of the book was precisely that they had been prevented from seeing through it by the mystifying ruses of our culture. But, in its very intransigent excessiveness, it hoped to open a tear in the fabric of the bland consensus that still prevailed. This expression of hope, to be sure, was still more of a “message in a bottle” (*Flaschenpost*) for an uncertain posterity than a clarion call to immediate action, but it was still meant as an act of defiance against impotent resignation.<sup>2</sup>

The joke history had in store for Marcuse was, of course, that almost immediately after he had declared critique exhausted and practical intervention in the world fruitless, the upheaval of the 1960’s proved him, at least to many observers, woefully wrong. It became possible for some to say, as Douglas Kellner was still able to do as late as 1988, that:

Marcuse exaggerated the stability of capitalism and failed to analyze adequately its crisis-tendencies and contradictions. Consequently, his theory of “one-dimensional” society cannot account either for the eruption of social revolt on a global scale in the 1960’s, or for the global crisis of capitalism in the 1970’s and 1980’s (Kellner, 1988: 180).

In the works that followed *One-dimensional Man*, especially the 1969 *Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse himself cautiously acknowledged he had been deaf to the rumblings beneath his feet.

But if perhaps less than precise in the short run, it is not so clear that *One-dimensional Man* was mistaken in its general observations about the ways in which capitalism had succeeded in blunting or containing forces that purported to subvert it. It is hard to not wonder who has been proven the better prophet, when Kellner goes on to say that:

[Marcuse] failed to perceive the extent to which his theory articulated a stage of historical development that was soon coming to a close and that would give way to a new era marked by a world crisis of capitalism and by social revolt and revolutionary struggles both within and without advanced capitalist societies (Kellner, 1988: 180).

It is not, however, my intention here to assign marks for prescience or to play the tired game of making solemn pronouncements about where we are in the never-ending story of the terminal crisis of capitalism, pronouncing the glass half-empty or proclaiming it instead as

<sup>2</sup> The later dispute between Marcuse and his erstwhile Institut colleagues over when the bottle was to be uncorked is treated in Voigts (2010). He notes that the metaphor was first used by Horkheimer in a letter written to Adorno in 1940 (Voigts, 2010: 21). It reappeared in a number of places, none perhaps as well-known as in *Minima Moralia*, where Adorno wrote “Even at the time the hope of leaving behind messages in bottles on the flood of barbarism bursting on Europe was an amiable illusion: the desperate letters stuck in the mud of the spring of rejuvenescence and were worked up by a band of Noble Human-Beings and other riff-raff into highly artistic but inexpensive wall ornaments” (Adorno, 1978: 209). Interestingly, the “even then” refers to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century reception of Nietzsche, not his own era, but the phrase seemed even more apt for his own predicament as an exile in America.

half full. It is perhaps better to rehearse the now familiar lament –was it first voiced by Russell Jacoby?– that the problem with late capitalism is that it is never late enough, and then move on to other questions. The one in particular I want to address is not how we can explain the ironic reversal of *One-dimensional Man*'s analysis, or to ponder why the reversal itself was not to last, but rather the role of irony itself in *One-dimensional Man*. What, I want to ask, is its relationship to the concept of two-dimensionality, which Marcuse inherited from Hegel? Is there a difference between an ironic distinction between surface and depth and the dialectical one posited by Marcuse and other Hegelian Marxists? Must we furthermore differentiate among varieties of irony to do justice to its dialectical potential?

But before we address these questions, we have to pause to consider a troubling possibility: that irony in any and all of its forms may have become impotent in the modern world, losing whatever subversive potential it may once have had. It was precisely this threat that Adorno had considered in an aphorism in *Minima Moralia* titled “Juvenal’s error,” composed in 1947 (Adorno, 1974: 209). The title refers to the Roman poet’s claim that it was “difficult not to write satire,” which Adorno claims is no longer the case in the modern world, a denial he extends to irony as well. Irony, Adorno argues,

[...] convicts its object by presenting it as what it purports to be; and without passing judgment, as if leaving a blank for the observing subject, measures it against its being-in-itself. It shows up the negative by confronting the positive with its own claim to positivity.” (Adorno, 1974: 210).<sup>3</sup>

It thus needs no conceptual mediation or even interpretation, but rather relies on an inter-subjective consensus about values, which it can then tacitly employ as a standard by which to measure and find wanting the status quo. It is thus comparable to what the Frankfurt School liked to call “immanent critique,” which drew its critical edge from invoking a society’s noble ideals against the bleak reality that dubiously claimed to embody them. The critical ground of irony and immanent critique alike is thus outrage at the actual betrayal of laudable ideals, ideals shared by all in a society, that are woefully unrealized. For irony, like immanent critique, must take seriously the ideologies that are falsely claimed to describe a reality that fails to live up to them, ideologies which nonetheless contain values and goals worth striving to realize.

But writing in the shadow of the Second World War, Adorno sourly concluded that both satire and irony are no longer possible:

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<sup>3</sup> Whether Adorno himself honored this prohibition on irony is questionable. In *Minima Moralia*, after all, he employed a number of ironic inversions –e.g., “melancholy science” for Nietzsche’s “gay science,” “the whole is the untrue” for Hegel’s “the whole is the true”– which suggested he expected his readers to be able to read ironically. For a discussion, see Rose (1978: 16).

Irony's medium, the difference between ideology and reality, has disappeared. The former resigns itself to confirmation of reality by its mere duplication. Irony used to say: such it claims to be, but such it is; today, however, the world, even in its most radical lie, falls back on the argument that things are like this, a simple finding which coincides, for it, with the good. There is not a crevice in the cliff of the established order in which the ironist might hook a fingernail (Adorno, 1974: 211).

Here we get an anticipation of Marcuse's claim that flat one-dimensionality is now the order of the day. Neither irony nor immanent critique is possible when no yawning gap between ideology and reality exists to produce the necessary outrage to motivate them. Instead, all that is left is a dull affirmation of a status quo by disillusioned and passive observers who have utterly lost whatever hope they might once have harbored that there is any meaningful alternative. The indignation that fueled satire and irony from Juvenal to modern times is now a fading memory; we have learned, Adorno seems to be saying, to love the culture industry in the same way the citizens of Orwell's Oceania loved Big Brother –is it a coincidence that the aphorism “Juvenal's error” was composed the same year as 1984?– and can no longer rely on a tacit consensus that something better is both desirable and possible.

Was irony still operative in *One-dimensional Man*? Is it something Marcuse validated in himself or merely used as a tool in the service of a post-ironic alternative? Does he, in fact, have a consistent attitude towards its function in the world whose bleak prospects he laments in his book? The first thing that must be acknowledged is that Marcuse's rhetoric often derives its power from his indignant insistence that what claims to be the case is in fact reversed by reality. In the very first paragraphs of the book's preface, we are told, *inter alia*, that:

[...] we submit to the peaceful production of the means of destruction, to the perfection of waste, to being educated for a defense which deforms the defenders and that which they defend [and] the political needs of society become individual needs and aspirations, their satisfaction promotes business and the commonweal, and the whole appears to be the very embodiment of Reason. And yet this society is irrational as a whole (Marcuse, 1991: xli).

Reading passages like this in 1971, Ronald Aronson, one of Marcuse's most devoted students, could claim that they are “rich with irony, joining terms and concepts kept apart by the mass media: perfection *and* waste; productivity *and* destruction, growth *and* repression, peace *and* war, capabilities *and* domination.” (Aronson, 1971: 261). Irony in this sense indeed remains a central tool of Marcuse's analysis as the book develops, one celebrated example being his critique of repressive or controlled desublimation, in which unconstrained libidinal energy serves the smoother functioning of a still unfree social and cultural order, rather than the liberation it promises (an argument that appears in another form around the same time in his critique of repressive tolerance).

Marcuse's reliance on irony indeed went the surface rhetoric of his argument. In fact, in 1970, an orthodox Marxist critic, the philosopher of law Mitchell Franklin, could contribute an essay to *Telos* titled "The irony of the beautiful soul in Marcuse," lamenting the ways in which Romantic notions of subjective irony had allegedly infected Marcuse's entire philosophy with an impotent Idealism that was the opposite of a robust dialectical materialism (Franklin, 1970).<sup>4</sup> The term "beautiful soul" was, of course, taken from Hegel, whose critique of Romantic irony as "infinite absolute negativity" (Hegel, 1920: 93-94) informed Franklin's claim that Marcuse had fallen prey to an existentialist fetish of ambiguity, nihilism and endless displacement, which failed to acknowledge the still vibrant role of the working class as the revolutionary subject of history. Franklin's confidence that orthodox dialectical materialism could still serve as an antidote to the disengaged "beautiful souls" of Romantic ironists unable to throw their lot in with the progressive forces of history was misplaced in 1970 –as even the editors of *Telos* themselves acknowledged (Delfini and Piccone, 1986: 54) – and seems even more so today. But his sensitivity to the central role of irony in Marcuse's *oeuvre* is worth noting.

The question, of course, is what kind of irony was it and did it have the nefarious implications that orthodox dialecticians like Franklin claimed it did? To answer this question, let me distinguish among three kinds of irony which I will call: 1) cynical, 2) paradoxical or unstable, and 3) dramatic or world historical, and then offer some thoughts on what might be seen as a fourth alternative. Cynical irony, expressing a loss of confidence in a meaningful gap between ideal and reality, was already accelerating in the interwar era, especially during the heyday of the "new objectivity" in the Germany out of which the Frankfurt School had emerged. It shows itself in the "cool conduct," to borrow Helmut Lethen's phrase, that collapsed the distinction between interiority and exteriority, producing a self that is an armored shell with no soft core of authenticity beneath (Lethen, 2002). It has even been discerned in the plays and poetry of Bertolt Brecht, by for example Peter Sloterdijk in his *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Noting that Brecht urged his public not to live off the "good old values," but to start with the "bad new reality," he writes,

Obviously, a new quality of irony and a non-affirmative form of affirmation makes itself felt here. In this irony, it is not a subject that has 'stayed clean' that reveals itself, who, distanced, above the fronts, the melee, and the tumult, tries to save its integrity. It is rather the irony of a bashed ego who has got caught up in the clockwork (rather like Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*) who

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<sup>4</sup> Franklin taught at the University of New York, Buffalo, where he was a mentor of many of *Telos*'s founding figures during their graduate school days. When he died in 1986, the journal had a special section of essays in his honor (Delfini and Piccone, 1986).



makes its hands as dirty as the circumstances are and who, in the midst of the goings-on, only takes care to observe alertly what it encounters (Sloterdijk, 1988: 441).

With Brecht, Sloterdijk contends, “the pugnacious irony appropriate to modernity makes itself felt: cynical irony. It does not resist reality with ‘imagined fantasies’ but exercises resistance in the form of unresisting accommodation” (Sloterdijk, 1988: 441).

Such cynical irony might still be at home in the world described by Adorno in *Minima Moralia* in which there is no crevice in the cliff of the established order to allow ironic distance to gain a critical foothold. It also reappeared in the heyday of postmodernism in the 1990’s (Bewes, 1997: 37-41), when imbued with melancholic affect, it could imply impotent surrender to the incoherence of a world that defied both understanding and transformation. But it is certainly hard to reconcile with the frankly utopian impulse –whether or not fleshed out by “imagined fantasies”– that could still motivate Marcuse to write *One-dimensional Man*. For all his respect for Brecht, whose “estrangement effect” he praises in that book and elsewhere, Marcuse did not embrace this kind of tactic, which risked the loss of any critical distance from that entangling clockwork in which it is enmeshed.

Another alternative, which we might call “paradoxical” or “unstable,” is more closely allied with the “beautiful soul” often identified with the German Romantics, in particular Friedrich Schlegel, who developed it in the 1790’s in his *Kritische and Athenäums Fragmente*. It operates on an essentially philosophical level. From its perspective, there are two stubbornly constant obstacles to attaining the full truth. The first arises from the inadequacy of language to communicate the content of thought or the intention of the speaker, what in a later vocabulary would be the gap in every sign between signifier and signified. All language is a thus only a fragment of or a limited perspective on a perpetually inaccessible totality. Irony expresses this transcendental condition of language, in which subjects are always fractured, at once empirical and ideal, never at one with their authentic selves. As Schlegel famously put it, “irony is a permanent parabasis,” referring to the trope in Greek tragedy in which the dramatic action is interrupted by the chorus stepping to the front of the stage and directly addressing the audience. What parabasis implies, in other words, is the denial of seamless narrative, non-reflective immediacy, and unity of action without something happening to undermine it. Parabasis is permanent because the apparent immediacy of the chorus’s address is itself open to reflective interruption, and so on down. Every intended meaning is thwarted, or at least distorted, by the imperfect medium of its expression, which is in excess of what is deliberately meant. In addition to parabasis, the favored trope of unstable irony is catachresis, in which, among other things, words fail to mean or refer unambiguously to one thing in particular.

In addition to the ironic implications of language’s unsublatable self-contestation, unstable irony drew on another, more metaphysical assumption: the paradoxical impossibility



and yet necessity of questing after the Absolute. Any attempt to know the Absolute, to reach the unconditioned foundation of meaning and express it adequately, is bound to fail because such knowledge would necessarily falsify it in the very act of conditioning it –as shown in vain attempts to define God’s characteristics in a positive way– but we cannot *refrain* from searching for it. Thus, Socratic questioning is the model of infinite striving for a knowledge that is always just out of the reach of the questioner. Both poetry and philosophy for the Romantic believer in paradoxical irony are forever becoming and never finished, always striving and never reaching a state of satiation.

It was, of course, this version of radical, destabilizing irony that attracted the critical attention of later commentators like Kierkegaard in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the admiration of post-structuralists in the 20<sup>th</sup>. To cite a typical formulation from Kevin Newmark’s recent *Irony on Occasion*, written in the tradition of Derrida and de Man, irony is “this self-resisting –that is, infinitely, although non-reflexively *repetitive*– truth about the literary structure of all possible philosophical meaning.” (Newmark, 2012: 38). Here we have an essentially transcendental argument about the human condition, the inevitably rhetorical cum literary refraction of even the most stringently philosophical reasoning, and the impossibility of ever escaping from the ambiguities that ensue. Shorn of the anxiety that infused the Romantic worldview, it could evolve into a staple of popular culture. As one student of “the ironic” in more recent history has noted, whereas the Romantics were still in search of authenticity in one form or another, it has become “comfortable with the artifices of mass culture, and the phantasmagoria of symbols and representations that accompany a capitalist economic order” (Saler, 2004: 140). Not much of this version of irony can obviously be found in Marcuse’s worldview.

How congenial was it instead to a third variant, which can be called dramatic or world-historical irony? In dramatic irony, the audience is given access to a knowledge of foretold outcomes or at least hidden meanings that are denied the characters in the play, allowing its members a critical distance from the action as it unfolds. We have early knowledge that is denied, say, to Oedipus and Othello, until the end of the play. Likewise, in what might be called “world-historical irony,” we benefit from a kind of proleptic hindsight, which grants us a superior, more total knowledge in comparison with that of the characters in a drama whose outcome they cannot foretell. Their intentions, we can appreciate as they cannot, have unintended consequences. That is, we adopt in advance the position of the last historian, an omniscient narrator who can see the shape of the meta-narrative after it has fully unfolded.

Hegel’s critique of the Romantics, which we’ve noted was invoked by orthodox dialectical materialists like Mitchell Franklin against Marcuse, sought to historicize what had been transcendentalized by Schlegel in precisely this way. As in the case of the melancholic “unhappiness consciousness” itself, Hegel saw paradoxical irony as a necessary, but ultimately surpassable moment in a dialectical process that he believed would have a comic rather than

ironic outcome, revealing itself as more of a good totality than a bad infinity. The pluralism of partial viewpoints, expressing irreconcilable subjective perspectivalism, that fueled the Romantic distrust of the Absolute were all folded into one meta-subjective standpoint, which sublated rather than abolished them. The Romantics' ironic detachment, ultimately frivolous for Hegel because of its escape from the serious business of living a meaningful life, was overcome in a synthesis of subject and object, in which engagement rather than distance defined the human investment in the world in which we were thrown. For Hegel, in short, individual moments in the dialectical process, however negative, contradictory or partial, should be understood as a necessary stage in an historical theodicy.

Kierkegaard shared Hegel's insistence that aesthetic detachment—hovering above the world as in the case of Romantic beautiful souls who refused to get their hands dirty—was an inadequate response to the challenges of our existence, ultimately lacking in the seriousness that true commitment entailed. Where, however, he differed was in his refusal to embrace the positive sublation of the ironic standpoint, the submersion, we might say, of the figure of Socrates, the critical questioner, in the speculative truth of Platonic Reason.<sup>5</sup> As one commentator has put it, Kierkegaard honored “the uniquely personal contribution of Socrates to the foundations of the dialectical imagination” (Ferguson, 1995: 42). But it was more of a negative than positive version of the dialectic. Despite the unintended consequences of subjective actions, the self for Kierkegaard is not to be dissolved into an objective process ruled by the “cunning of Reason.” For Kierkegaard, the arrow of irony is reversed. All moments of apparent positivity should be understood ironically as illusory consolations for the inherently unsublatable distance between subject and object, individual and collectivity, human and divine. For Hegel, in contrast, individual moments in the dialectical process, however negative, contradictory or partial, should be understood ironically as a necessary stage in an historical theodicy.

Where, to return to our main question, does Marcuse stand in this shifting terrain of attitudes towards irony? At his bleakest, he echoes the bitter complaint of Adorno in *Minima Moralia* that there is no space for ironic distance in the present one-dimensional world. It is, he tells us, a world “in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe” (Marcuse, 1991: 12). The “total mobilization” of all media to defend the status quo has made communication of “transcending contents [...] technically impossible [...] the impossibility of speaking a non-reified language, of communicating the negative...has materialized” (Marcuse, 1991: 68). Even the potentially productive discontent of the “unhappiness consciousness” has been blunted by the rise of the pseudo-happiness produced by “repressive desublimation.” Indeed, the very concept of Reason, which remained

<sup>5</sup> For a useful discussion of their differing attitudes towards irony, see Taylor (1980: 94-95).

for Marcuse a standard by which social injustice and oppression could be measured, was in danger of losing its critical edge: “in this society, the rational rather than the irrational becomes the most effective vehicle of mystification” (Marcuse, 1991: 189).

With pronouncements like these, Marcuse demonstrated how much in the early 1960’s he still shared with the Horkheimer and Adorno of the late 1940’s. It may thus seem, as critics like Franklin argued, that this attitude brought him close to the unengaged “beautiful soul” decried by Hegel, but it is not because he, or they, saw the world through the subjective irony of Romantic infinite unsublatable reflexivity. Nor, as we have already argued, did he adopt the Brechtian ironic cynicism that dove into the “bad new reality” and never found a way to come up for air. Instead, Marcuse’s mobilization of both the rhetoric of irony and the contention that it was evident in the objective workings of the world in which he lived was based on a Hegelian belief –now more desperate hope than self-confident certainty– that despite everything, a second dimension was still at least a potentiality in a one-dimensional world. *Pace* Franklin, he too anchored his own position in a redemptive meta-narrative in which the negativity of the Great Refusal would somehow, some day be turned into the utopian positivity of a world in which art and technology, Reason and the libido, freedom and democracy were reconciled without contradiction.

If therefore we have to identify the type of irony present in *One-dimensional Man*, it is neither that of the beautiful soul hovering above the world in order to keep his hands clean nor the cynical realist fully immersed in it, but that of the chastened, but still hopeful historical materialist who believes the future can still redeem the promises of the past, however much they are now thwarted. It is the irony of a narrator of an unfolding story that, against all odds, he thinks still has a chance of ending happily. But because he has no faith in any immanent force or movement or agency who can serve as the heroic protagonist of the story, it is also the irony of an impatient spectator who has the honesty not to identify himself with a Promethean pseudo-agent able to make rather than suffer his fate.

At the end of the book, Marcuse locates the feeble repository of whatever promise of a future alternative there might be in the realm of art, which he claims is the enclave of a genuinely emancipatory rationality that defies the irrationality of instrumental reason. He already calls on what in his last work he would identify as the “aesthetic dimension” (Marcuse, 1978) as the only plausible answer, at least for now, to one-dimensional society, even going so far as to assert that “the more blatantly irrational the society becomes, the greater the rationality of the artistic universe” (Marcuse, 1978: 239). In what is a final ironic gesture, he concludes that “the advancing one-dimensional society alters the relationship between the rational and irrational. Contrasted with the fantastic and insane aspects of its rationality, the realm of the irrational becomes the home of the really rational –of the ideas which may ‘promote the art of life’” (Marcuse, 1978: 247). But because it is ultimately life that must be changed, rather than art serving as a permanent refuge from it, Marcuse refused the aes-

thetic escape from engaged commitment to transforming life that Kierkegaard and Hegel alike had condemned in Romanticism.

Marcuse, in short, maintained a position that cannot be identified with the elevated irony of the beautiful soul perpetually hovering above the world or with the cynical irony of the armored subject striving to survive amidst its ruins, let alone with the radical irony of the post-modernist skeptic who places us eternally in the prison-house or reflecting hall of mirrors of language. It is rather the irony of a latter-day Hegelian, stubbornly holding on to a world-historical perspective, who believes we can ultimately move beyond the stage of “infinite absolute negativity” into a more positive “comic” reconciliation beyond irony of any kind. His pessimism about doing so in the immediate future thus never descended into the interminably melancholic lassitude that Kierkegaard for one identified with the ironic attitude at its most self-abnegating.

Another way to characterize the ironic moment in *One-dimensional Man* is to identify it with what is sometimes called “stable irony,” which J.M. Bernstein describes in *The Philosophy of the Novel* as dividing:

[The] readership into “us” and “them,” aligning the knowing reader with the author in a space of truth, a space free from vanity and self-deception [...] the epistemic effect of a stable irony is to establish a community between author and reader, a community of the undeceived, a community of truth whose authority is the authorial separation of appearance and reality which only the knowing can recognize (Bernstein, 1984: 161).

As in the case of Socratic irony, it can employ temporary dissimulation in the service of ultimately moving us towards virtue. For all its apparent despair, *One-dimensional Man* was in fact written with the faith that such a community, however small, could exist and grow. And as the success of the book in stimulating its expansion shows, it was for a while at least a viable assumption. In fact, that we are still reading it today, fifty years later, suggests that such a community of readers who find themselves largely in agreement with its arguments has not entirely vanished.

But I also think we would be fooling ourselves if we didn’t take seriously the intervening changes, what at the beginning of this paper I described as the ironic jokes played by history on many of those arguments. As a result, it is increasingly difficult to mobilize the confidence that we are part of a meaningful “community of the undeceived” who really know which way history is going or even should be going and can make sense of the forces or agencies that will help us move in the right direction. For we may well be closer to a situation already characterized by Jürgen Habermas back in 1985 as “*die neue Unübersichtlichkeit*,” the “new unsurveyability” (Habermas, 1985) in which we cannot plausibly adopt the position of a world-historical narrator capable of sustaining the stable irony based on an imagined

community of the enlightened adopted by Marcuse in *One-dimensional Man*. It was perhaps Richard Rorty who most cogently expressed the sobering implications of this loss in his defense of liberal “ironists” in his 1989 collection *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. According to Rorty, they realized “that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed,” and thus lacked any faith in their ability to choose final vocabularies and make serious commitments in a world of contingency and uncertainty (Rorty, 1989: 73). Not only did they acknowledge the impossibility of firm and unimpeachable value commitments, but also admitted the tentative and revisable quality of all attempts to write definitive narratives by which we might orient ourselves in a world of rapid change.

The question that I want to address as conclusion is thus the following: is there, in fact, a more promising notion of irony, latent in *One-dimensional Man*, that avoids the limitations of disinterested distance, cynical compromise, and the dizzying *mise en abyme* of post-modern or the anything goes relativism of liberal irony, and yet does not rely on the dubious security of a discredited world-historical narrative that is harder and harder to endorse? Perhaps the answer lies in that aesthetic dimension in which Marcuse poured so many of his utopian aspirations. One place to begin is the suggestive discussion of irony in theater from Sophocles to Beckett by a third-generation Frankfurt School theorist, Christoph Menke, in his *Tragic Play*, first published in 2005 and translated four years later (Menke, 2009: 50).

In discussing *Oedipus Rex*, Menke borrows Connop Thirwall’s distinction between the “irony of the action” and the “the poet’s irony.” The former means that the tragic hero is not merely the passive victim of an externally mandated fate, but rather unintentionally brings it about himself. In the case of Oedipus, his fate is unwittingly brought about through the curse he hurls on the unknown murderer of his wife’s late husband, a curse he hopes will lift the plague of infertility that has struck the city of Thebes. As a result, his own miserable destiny is self-inflicted, for he inadvertently had cursed himself, not knowing that he had been that very murderer. The “poet’s irony,” which is another way to say what we have called “dramatic irony,” is that of the playwright, expressed by the chorus, and grasped by the audience, which knows from the outside what is unfolding before its eyes. It is the irony of the distant spectator, not the protagonist in the drama, a bit like the world-historical ironist who can anticipate the outcome of the story and knows the narrative as a whole, a knowledge not yet available to the characters in the action.

Now, what makes this suggestive for our purposes is Menke’s argument that the two ironic positions are in fact integrated in the case of Oedipus, whose curse unintentionally brings about his downfall.

In his ironic-equivocal speech [his curse] Oedipus knows of the tragic-ironic reversal of his prosperity into adversity because he stands in relation to himself at the ironic distance of the spectator. And by means of this ironic-equivocal speech Oedipus brings about the tragic-ironic reversal of

his prosperity into adversity because he stands in relation to himself at the ironic distance of the author [in the sense of unwittingly authoring his own fate] (Menke, 2009: 50).

In other words, the subject-positions of the unwitting author of an ironic reversal, who is responsible for doing the deed, and that of the knowing spectator who understands its meaning from afar merge in the end. Much can be said about this merger, but what is important for our purposes is that it precludes the “cool conduct” of both the cynical ironist and the beautiful, but detached soul hovering above the world. Instead, it embodies at least in part that engagement in existence that both Kierkegaard and Hegel defended, each in his own way, an engagement that implies that irony need not be without practical implications in the way we confront the challenges of life, even if we cannot always bring about exactly what we intend.

The implication of all this will, I hope, become clearer if we turn in conclusion to yet another commentator on the meaning of irony, the philosopher and psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear, who titled the *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* he gave at Harvard in 2008 *A Case for Irony* (Lear, 2011). Drawing on Kierkegaard’s analysis of Socratic irony, but distancing himself from the Dane’s negative interpretation, at least in his early writings, of its dangers, Lear argues that an ironic existence can be a productive path towards what he calls the pursuit of human excellence. To the extent that it is a form of detachment, it is detachment from social pretense, alienation from given social roles, but is also one accompanied by a kind of uncanny longing for what is lost. Thus, “developing a capacity for ironic disruption may be a manifestation of seriousness about one’s practical identity. It is not merely a disruption of one’s practical identity; it is a form of loyalty to it” (Lear, 2011: 22). That is, it involves a recognition that although the pretense of already living up to ideals needs to be shattered, the ideals themselves can still function to impel us forward. Is there a way in which this personal quest has an implication beyond the self, an implication that might even be understood as political? Lear contends that the point of irony correctly understood is

[...] not simply to destroy pretenses, but to inject a certain form of not-knowing into polis life.... it shows the difficulty of becoming human: not just the arduousness of maintaining a practical identity in the face of temptation, but the difficulty of getting the hang of a certain kind of playful, disrupting existence to understand –that is, to grasp practically– the limits of human understanding of such excellence (Lear, 2011: 36).

Rather than leading to the superficial relativism of Rorty’s liberal ironist who distrusts all final vocabularies and refuses to see any narrative as definitive, Lear claims that this kind of irony can lead to a more serious and intense engagement with what turns out to be one’s own final vocabulary.



Taking off his philosopher's hat and putting on his psychoanalyst's, Lear then argues that unconscious psychic fantasies are a source of the ideal that we still yearn for when we realize the inadequacy of social pretense and allow an uncanny return of what is repressed, an *unheimlich* refusal to be "at home" in the present world and in our present identities. Rather than understanding psychic unity on the basis of ego strength to be the ultimate goal of our lives, he argues that experiencing the ironic disruption produced by this return is a much clearer sign of a life well lived. Instead of seeking to tame our desires and relinquish our fantasies in the name of ego-strength or rational mastery,

[...] it would seem to be rational to call into question the ultimate rationality of the picture of rationality as simply consisting in my ability to step back and reflect on how well or badly items of consciousness conform to my conscious practical identity (Lear, 2011: 67).

Irony therefore allows us to remain within the unresolved tension between what in the terms Christoph Menke introduces in his discussion of tragedy are the "irony of agency" and "the poet's irony" in the sense that it involves a certain responsibility for our destinies with an awareness that there are times when we have to surrender to forces or desires that are outside of that control. But unlike the tragic outcome of an *Oedipus Rex*, in which both ironic reversals conspire to turn our prosperity into adversity, it has the opposite potential: to move us towards more meaningful lives well spent in the pursuit of ideals worth pursuing. In short, we know we are not fully in control, but we don't relinquish the responsibility of acting as if our actions are meaningful in determining outcomes.

And so, we arrive in conclusion back at *One-dimensional Man* with an enriched understanding of the role of irony in its underlying make-up. For if we concede the untenability of the larger world-historical narrative that Marcuse himself could not entirely abandon, we can still find in his insistence on the superiority of a two-dimensional understanding of the human condition over its one-dimensional alternative something akin to what Jonathan Lear calls the committed pursuit of personal excellence, albeit with the potential to transcend the purely personal. It is an ironic attitude that is neither cynical nor disengaged, but instead resists accommodation to social pretense and draws on the unfulfilled fantasies of our unconscious to fuel our striving beyond the status quo. Like the irony Menke discerns in Greek tragedy, it both acknowledges the force of external circumstances and the vagaries of fortune, but also helps us to see that we are responsible at least in part for our fate. It may not provide the reassurance of Socratic or dramatic irony at its most knowing, but in a world that will not grant us such knowledge, it keeps alive the negative power of two-dimensionality that Marcuse so eloquently defended. It may not lead to a melodramatic Great Refusal intransigently rejecting the totality of oppressive circumstances in our lives, but it may give us the resilience to keep marshalling all the little refusals that can make even



damaged lives worth living. And in so doing, it may also inspire a meaningful political engagement, one that moves beyond the pursuit of personal excellence to something larger. In that pursuit, there may well be a positive role for irony with all of its inherent two-dimensionality and resistance to settled meanings, rather than rejecting it as merely a marker of impotent cynicism, aesthetic escapism or the reveries of a beautiful soul hovering above a fallen world it cannot hope to change.

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